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ABSTRACT

In dealing with destructive writing anxiety--as opposed to the creative tension experienced by successful writers--composition teachers must identify the fears associated with writing and design ameliorating classroom activities. Two well-documented tests, the Daly-Miller Appreciation Test and the Thompson Writing Attitude Survey (TWAS), can be used to identify writing attitudes and the causes of anxiety. These causes include lack of skills, lack of knowledge about the writing process, fear of revealing oneself, fear of structuring thoughts, fear of the blank page, and fear of being evaluated. While several corrective strategies have been tested, including the elimination of compulsory writing and consultations with individual students, composition teachers can achieve more success by teaching language studies as well as writing. This approach draws from seven disciplines: (1) philosophy, for an understanding of the use of symbols; (2) anthropology, for an appreciation of the role of words and structure in the thinking process; (3) grammar, to demonstrate the possibilities of sentence manipulation; (4) semantics, to illustrate the difference between meaning and structure; (5) psychology, to reveal the connection between writing and learning; (6) lexicography, for a better understanding of standard English; and (7) rhetoric, for an understanding of the writing process. (The TWAS is included.) (JP)

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WRITING ANXIETY AND FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

by

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Freshman Composition teachers have experienced anxiety when writing themselves, and so presume that their students have. Teachers may find it profitable to distinguish between the creative tension of successful student writers and the destructive anxiety of poor student writers so that they can adjust their teaching methods to help individual writers.

Writing Anxiety has been defined variously: by Daly and Miller as a specific case of general communication apprehension in real or imagined communication situations;[1] by Lynn Bloom as analogous to Math Anxiety, a cluster of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors which keep a person from writing at all, or with less efficiency and effectiveness than he or she might do otherwise;[2] and by this author as a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write.[3] Current research, while acknowledging that positive aspects of writing anxiety do exist, has not primarily concerned itself with the creative tension experienced by successful writers: the term, as it is applied in research is negative.

Composition teachers easily recognize the results of student anxiety: essays laboriously written, handed in late, or hastily written and passed off as finished products; students hanging around offices in hopes of magic grades, skipping class, dropping out, repeating writing courses, or changing majors to avoid writing. But we don't easily identify the anxiety that results from fears associated specifically with writing.

Research in Writing Anxiety has revealed many bases for the anxiety, some of which are lack of appropriate skill information, lack of appropriate knowledge about the writing process, fear of revealing oneself through the written word, fear of structuring and ordering thoughts, fear of the blank page, and fear of being evaluated, not necessarily in that order of importance.

To help identify students with these deficiencies, fears, and behaviors, we have at least two well documented tests: the Daly-Miller Apprehension Test standardized in 1975[4] and the Thompson Writing Attitude Survey documented in 1978.[5] Both tests are Likert scales listing statements of writing attitudes. Daly-Miller have reported that their test items were modeled after those on similar measures of communication apprehension. This author reported that the Thompson Survey items were developed from hundreds of statements reported by teachers and students during attitude discussion sessions. In these sessions, teachers and students downplayed the evaluation process, while worrying more about the committment inherent in the writing process. Therefore, while the Daly-Miller scale leans towards fear of evaluation (1/3 of 26 items), the Thompson Survey leans towards statements describing the writer's feelings about the writing process and its consequences.

ATTITUDE SURVEY

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Directions: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by writing a number in the space at the left of each statement.

5...strongly disagree
4...disagree
3...neutral or undecided
2...agree
1...strongly agree

___1. Writing in a diary gives me a sense of having accomplished something with my day.

___2. I always do well in English Composition.

___3. When I write I can never find the right word.

___4. It is a joy to transform feelings by writing onto a blank piece of paper.

___5. Writing is not difficult for me.

___6. I don't feel I can find the right words to write what I want to say.

___7. Writing enables me to search myself more deeply than talking does.

___8. Writing is a chore for me.

___9. When I have to do a writing assignment I panic.

__10. I enjoy becoming involved with the flow of ideas in writing words.

__11. When I hand in a paper in class I hide it in the bottom or middle of the stack.

__12. People think my writing is childish.

__13. I can never seem to get my ideas organized.

__14. When I try to write I have trouble getting started.

__15. I can not satisfy the requirements of English teachers when I write.

__16. When I want to solve a personal problem I write all the issues involved.

__17. Writing helps me to decide what I think about a subject.

__18. Writing is freeing.

__19. When I am given a writing assignment I put off doing it until the last minute.

__20. I like to write my feelings about things in personal writing.

__21. I've always received good grades on writing assignments.

__22. My teachers make positive comments on my papers about my writing.

__23. Writing gives me a chance to convey my sense of reality.

__24. I enjoy writing when I have time.
__25. Discussing my writing with others is enjoyable.
__26. People who write well are people who think clearly.
__27. My writing makes sense to me, but not to my teachers.
__28. I avoid writing.
__29. Thinking about writing makes my mind go blank.
__30. I don't like my peers to read my essays.

Because the tests are attitude scales, there is no cut-off point where a measurement can tell you that a particular score of Writing Anxiety will interfere with productive writing. But we can say that a relatively high score on a Writing Anxiety Scale indicates anxiety interference with writing success. Despite a number of studies researched in the past five years, we do not know the percentage of freshman composition students who may experience interference with writing through Writing Anxiety.

Whatever the definitions or testing apparatus, the research on Writing Anxiety has produced evidence of enough negative effects to motivate composition teachers towards efforts to alleviate that anxiety. Depending on one's orientation a teacher may decide to adopt one or more of these attitude goals: less anxiety about communicating; fewer anxious feelings, beliefs, and behaviors about writing; less anxiety about specific steps in the writing process.

Identifying these attitude goals, breaking them into specific objectives, and designing classroom activities is not easy. Using the Daly-Miller scale to test theory, a few classroom strategies have been tested. Powers, Cook, and Meyer have postulated that compulsory writing increased Writing Anxiety, and therefore might be avoided as a classroom activity.[6] Martin and Lynn Bloom, feeling that several of the Daly-Miller

measures were more important than others in delineating interfering Writing Anxiety, have modified the scale to test what they feel are four components of Writing Anxiety: affective, cognitive, environmental and behavioral.[7] Lynn Bloom's activities in her Writing Anxiety workshops revolve around individual consultation in these four areas.[8]

Because of the nature of writing, the writing class and its teacher often become the focus of much free-floating anxiety. Obviously coping with some of this anxiety needs to be done in individual interviews, not the classroom. The returning housewife, the change of careers adult, the vocational rehabilitation student, the noisy neurotic, the immature 18 year old, all need to be dealt with privately and at length, preferably by a counselor. But once the writing anxious student is identified, the problem remains for the already overburdened composition teacher. How can the anxiety be dealt with through group activities in the usual college program?

My disposition as a Freshman Composition teacher has always been towards language study, something to talk and write about while pursuing writing skills. Somewhere along the line, I began to feel that teaching language study alleviated Writing Anxiety in students. After I formulated my attitude scale (at the time I didn't know about Daly-Miller), I tested my students and discovered that after the language study course anxiety declined. On the pre-test the scores ranged from 124 to 62, with a mean of 88 and a median of 88; on the post test, the range of scores was 120 to 60, with a mean of 81.9 and a median of 78. Fewer than 50% of the students experienced Writing Anxiety in a class where the writing, as measured by holistic grading, had improved significantly. Furthermore, writing grades rose significantly as anxiety scores declined.[9]

At the 1979 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I reported preliminary research comparing four curriculum modes, traditional, rhetorical, individual, and language study. Language

study significantly decreased Writing Anxiety to a greater extent than the others while significantly increasing writing ability.

A complete Language Study curriculum is available.[10] Most of its components can be used fractionally in various curriculum approaches. A teacher concerned about Writing Anxiety would incorporate information about language aimed at these attitude goals and objectives:

* Reduce the mystery surrounding language
  - less anxiety about words as "things"
    + more knowledge about symbols
  - less anxiety about meaning of words and sentences
    + more knowledge of patterns and structure
  - less anxiety about language rules
    + more knowledge about history and formation of language
  - less anxiety about standards of language correctness
    + more knowledge about standard English and dialects
* Reduce the mystery surrounding the writing process
  - less anxiety about discovering information
    + more knowledge of invention
  - less anxiety about thinking
    + more knowledge about connections between thinking and writing
  - less anxiety about ordering thoughts
    + more knowledge about conventional order

There are seven major disciplines where material covering these goals can be found. Philosophy contributes concepts about the use of symbols, patterned structures and word use, so that students become less anxious about creating their own meaning. From the Sapir-Whorf theory in Anthropology, students become aware

that we need words and structures to think. Lexicology, through dialect study, alleviates anxiety about standard English and provides students with positive choices. Grammar theory supplies exercises in manipulating sentences through transformations, through sentence combining practice and through generating exercises. Semantics, in describing the difference between meaning and structure, provides recognition of affective and social communication, lessening student anxiety about reporting his/her own reality. To reduce anxiety about the writing process, teachers can incorporate ideas from cognitive Psychology which describes connections between learning and writing. From theories of systematic relationships, teachers can suggest exercises in synthesis and analysis. And finally, Rhetoric provides theories of the process, from invention, through order, to revision.

Discovering the level of Writing Anxiety in a class of students is relatively easy: the attitude surveys can be completed in about 15 minutes. Adjusting teaching methods requires some effort, but such effort will usually result in better, anxiety reduced writing.

FOOTNOTES

[1]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English 10(Winter, 1975): 243.

[2]Lynn Z. Bloom and Martin Bloom, "An Empirical Study of Writing Anxiety: Its Manifestations and Reduction," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

[3]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of a Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition" (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, 1978) p. 8.

[4]Daly and Miller, pp. 242-49.

[5]Thompson, pp. 68-71

[6]William G. Powers, John A. Cook and Russell Meyer, "The Effect of Compulsory Writing on Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English 13(October, 1979): 225-230.

[7]Bloom and Bloom

[8]Ibid.

[9]Thompson, pp. 78-81

[10]Carol J. Boltz and Merle O'Rourke Thompson, Language and Reality (Sherman Oaks, Ca.: Alfred Publishing Co., 1979).

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